

speak in class but not doing so because they “felt insecure, inadequate, or uncertain.” The percentage of female students and African American students responding in this manner was somewhat higher than among other segments of the student population. Clearly, many students want to talk, but need encouragement from their teachers. On the other hand, calling on students ensures that all students make a contribution to the class, but can embarrass shy students and penalize students who really want to speak on a given topic.

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Combining both methods leads to more participation in class discussion. You can combine volunteering and calling on students by beginning a discussion topic by asking for volunteers. When a student responds to your question, call on other students to support, add to, or modify that student’s comments. Try to encourage all students to participate early in your course. The more time that goes by, the less likely shy or unconfident students will ever be to volunteer. Make clear in your attitude that you know all students have important contributions to make and that you have confidence in each student. Also make sure that you allow enough time for students to think after you ask a question. Many teachers only wait about one second for an answer. By waiting as much as five seconds, you allow more reserved students the chance to formulate their responses and to get up the courage to answer. For additional information about encouraging student participation, see the sections on group work and participation within each chapter in Part II of this handbook.

Monitoring Student Comments

It is vital that you, as the teacher, takes responsibility to ensure a comfortable environment for all students in the class. When students voice comments that attack or malign a particular group (such as race, religion, or sexual orientation) those comments potentially threaten some students in the classroom. In this situation, do not ignore such remarks, or change the subject. While it is unnecessary to reprimand the student directly, take issue with the statement made and remind the whole class that such statements are hurtful and do not further the pursuit of knowledge. Where relevant, challenge the statement’s validity by pointing to statistics or studies that challenge stereotypes. For example, if a student makes a comment about African American women who take advantage of welfare, it would be instructive to point out that the majority of mothers on public assistance are, in fact, Caucasian. To ensure friendly and constructive discussion, try to prevent students from attacking each other personally. Most often, the kinds of attacks students make on each other come from their perceptions of each others’ background and experience. Students accuse each other of not having “the right” to speak on an issue because they do not have the experience needed to speak about the issue. Remind students that while personal experience can be a valuable resource for drawing conclusions, it remains only one resource which other personal experiences may contradict.
